

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) Sexual Dysfunction and Pain

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Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) Sexual Dysfunction and Pain

What is sexual dysfunction?

Many women and men experience sexual problems at some point in their lives. Sexual dysfunction can mean that a person has a problem with sexual desire, arousal, difficulty achieving orgasm, or getting pleasure from sex, and sexual pain. Men can experience problems with erection, while women can have problems with lubrication. Sometimes problems with sex can happen as a side effect from medications.

Problems with desire can mean that a person does not want to have sex (including masturbation), does not have any sexual thoughts or fantasies, does not want to have sexual contact, or does not have pleasure during sex. A problem with arousal means that a person does not experience the physical or emotional changes that happen during sex. When a person has sex, but they do not experience orgasms or feelings like an orgasm, that may mean that they have orgasmic problems.

How can pain cause sexual pain and vaginismus?

Sexual pain is also called dyspareunia. Sexual pain can be caused by many conditions. Sometimes sexual pain can be caused by infections, trauma, vaginal skin conditions, endometriosis, and fibroids. Pain with sex can even be caused by bladder infections, or, in aging women, the pain can be caused by dryness and changes in vaginal skin due to low hormones. Many times, there is no infection or trauma, instead the pain is caused by a tightening of the vaginal muscles. When the vaginal muscles do not relax during sex, a person can experience a lot of pain, redness and swelling. Sometimes the pain can cause a person to be very afraid of having sex or to avoid sex all together. **Vaginismus** is a condition that happens when a person has an intense fear of sex, or of being touched in the vaginal area, along with tightening of the vaginal muscles. Women with vaginismus cannot tolerate any type of vaginal penetration and many times they even have problems when a doctor tries to do a vaginal examination.

What else can cause sexual problems?

Some medications to treat high blood pressure, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and overactive bladder can also cause problems with sex. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) medications used to treat mental health conditions, alcohol, marijuana, and opioid pain-relieving medication can also cause problems with sex. Fatigue, increased demands from family or work, stress, low self-esteem, problems with body image, decreased relationship well-being with your partner can also decrease sexual desire, arousal and orgasm.

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Prior and current experiences with sexual abuse or violence can also cause problems with many different aspects of your sexual health.

What can you do to decrease pain during sex?

Use vaginal lubrication even if you do not have dryness. If you use condoms, use only water-based or silicone lubricants. Allow time for foreplay and arousal before penetration and try different positions and sexual activities before intercourse. Try sexual toys, mental imagery, and fantasy for stimulation. Empty your bladder before and after sex. If you have pain during sex, do not keep having sex. Instead get help from a clinician. Avoid alcohol, get lots of sleep and rest. Work on problems that may be affecting your relationship and don't be afraid to get help from a sexual counselor. Make specific time for romantic and erotic activities with your partner.

How are sexual problems diagnosed?

Do not be afraid to talk about your sexual problems with your doctor or other healthcare specialist. To figure out what is wrong, your clinician may ask you a lot of personal and private questions. The clinician will also do a physical examination which will include a pelvic exam. A urine test and a test for vaginal infections are a routine part of the evaluation. Sometimes, the clinician may order a pelvic ultrasound. This is a test where sound waves are used to take a closer look at the organs in the pelvis like the uterus, ovaries, and bladder.

How are sexual problems treated?

Treatment depends on the cause. For example, vaginal infections are treated with anti-microbials. Problems with lubrication and dryness may be treated with lubricants. In some women, estrogen therapy is used to restore moisture and reduce dryness. If you have difficulty with penetration or the pelvic muscles, the clinician may recommend physical therapy and vaginal dilators. These are tube shaped devices that help stretch the muscles of the vaginal. You may also be referred to a sex therapist, a couples counselor or another mental health specialist, and this can happen regardless of whether you are receiving other therapies.